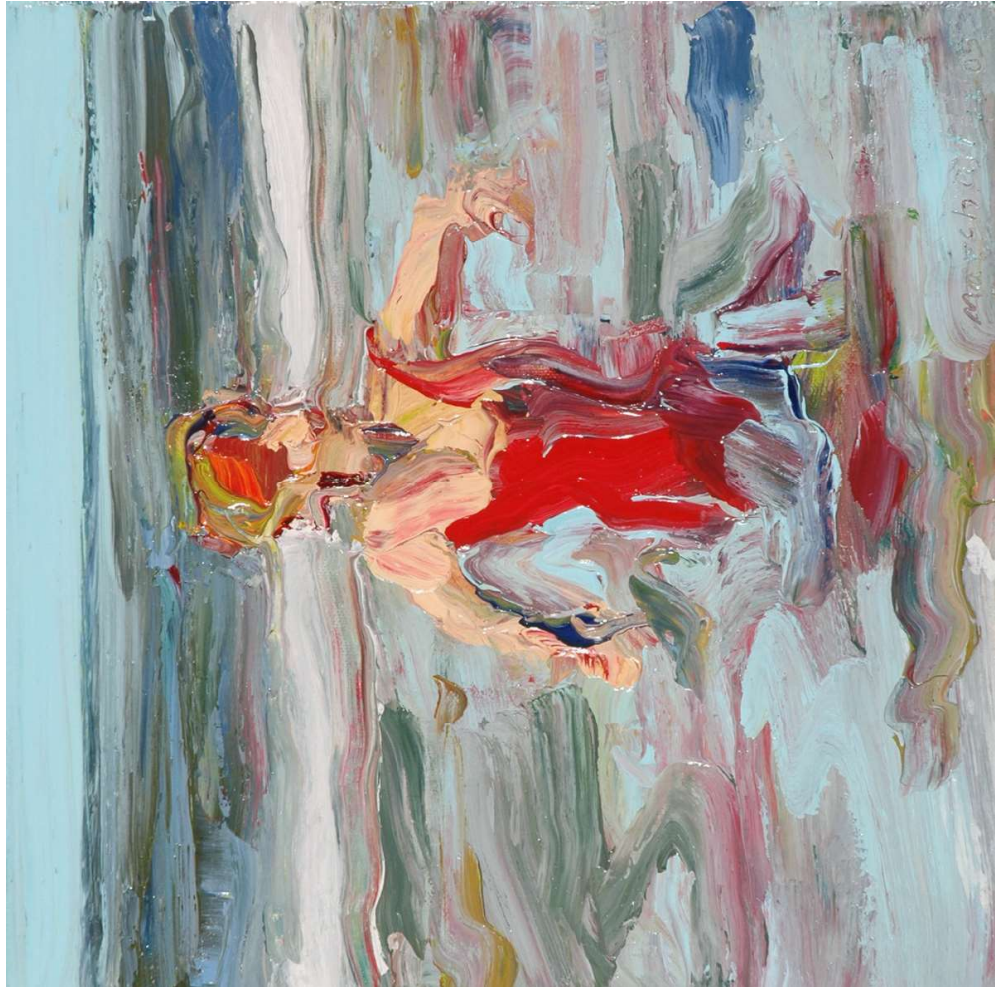


MARSHALL CROSSMAN

Beach Series #102, 2005
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12 in.



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

AMBER WONG

Sometimes a Body Just Knows What to Do

What I learned as a rower
on Lake Washington

*Harmony, balance, rhythm. There you
have it. That is what life is all about.*

—George Pocock, leading designer
and builder of racing shells

Driving along the shore of Lake Washington, still enfolded in January darkness, I anxiously peck through the houses that dot the shoreline. Just beyond, a wide expanse of open water shimmers like sequins in the moonlight. A little chop, but not bad. Exhaling softly, I loosen my grip on the steering wheel and sink back into my seat for the twelve-minute drive to the Pocock boathouse.

How eight years of rowing has changed me! Before I turned fifty, water was an abstract of the Seattle landscape, bridged by roads, flowing between landforms, fed from the sky. Now, water is a character to be coaxed to cooperate. Strafed by wind, water is petulant and destructive, sometimes a bully; oars slap waves and waves fight back. Sprinkled by rain, water dances; tiny bubbles pop to the surface like fine champagne; oars glide over flat water like hula hands. Each day I'm alert to a new personality. My dread—or joy—can be parsed in strokes, in minutes, in every kilometer rowed.

My car's headlights reflect off damp pavement as I cruise through a series of green lights. At this hour, there's no traffic. I turn up the radio, the luminous yellow sleeve of my hi-viz splash jacket set aglow by dashboard lights. Windshield wipers sweep and pause, sweep and pause.

“Would you guys please quit looking at the weather report? Once you get here, it's usually fine!” Stacie yells over her shoulder as she leads us downstairs to the boat bays. She yanks up her hood and tucks away her blond hair. The three of us—Elizabeth, Heidi, and I—smile and shrug. Our frantic group texting this morning—How windy is it? How hard is it raining?—felt perfectly reasonable considering our lives were on the line. When I left home I was prepared for the iffy conditions at the Montlake Cut: near-freezing temperatures with sustained winds at eight miles per hour, gusts to twelve. We won't row at fifteen. So as we carry our oars down to the dock, the three of us are thinking the same thing: *Now that we've rolled out of bed at this ungodly hour, let's hope the weather eases during our hour-and-a-half row.*

“If it gets bad, we can always come in,” I say, although I know we won't.

Angled waves bounce our double scull against the dock. I kick off my shoes and try to ignore the frigid water wicking straight to my toes. "Oars across!" Elizabeth calls loudly at my back, signaling our synchronous dive into the midscape of rowers. Oars glide through oarlocks, stop with a *thunk* when properly extended. "One foot in . . ." I grab both our handles in one hand, push the sliding seat back with my toe, and step onto the seat deck, the one spot on the boat that can bear weight, "and down." I wriggle both feet into damp rowing shoes. *Eww*. Even though it's barely 7:00 a.m., this boat has already been out and back this morning. The slender Hudson racing shell, no wider than my hips, suspends us mere inches off the water. We walk our boat off the dock, fingers tripping along the dock's edge. One last push and we're free.

I always hold my breath at the moment of launch. Once my fingers leave the dock, I've set myself adrift without a life vest. The intact boat serves as our only flotation device.

* * *

My feelings for water have always been *look, don't touch*. A sixty-year-old's lazy memory: a cloudless day in California, a pool party. I float on an air mattress, the sun's warmth a narcotic. I start to doze. Through heavy lids, I see rainbows on my eyelashes. My world tips and suddenly I'm in an ice bath, gasping for breath. Harsh chlorine fills my throat; my toes don't touch bottom. I scream. I can't swim. Bright sky glows through a rippling lens; then it doesn't. I'm sinking. A yell and a big splash, and the sky is too bright. I turn my head; Dad's soaked golf shirt feels like silk against my cheek. Chlorine burns my throat on the way back up. As Dad carries me inside, I see his kicked-off loafers askew at the pool's edge.

At eight I start to manage my fear. I force myself to swim. At thirteen I pass California's mandatory swim test, a requirement for high school graduation. At seventeen I try to impress my blond college boyfriend by agreeing to go bodysurfing on a beach near San Diego. He instructs me never to turn my back on a wave and to always look for the sky. Between violent churning, I cough up saltwater and gingerly unload the sand that's jammed into my bikini bottom before heading out to catch the next wave. I wipe the snot from my nose and silently plead, "Can I stop now?"

At twenty-nine I try to impress my new husband by

agreeing to go white-water kayaking. We already own flat-water kayaks, so he convinces me this is a logical rung up the adrenaline ladder. I feel differently when I zip into a dry suit, don my helmet, and push off from the shore of the Skykomish River. Heart pounding an ever faster rhythm of "I think I can," I feel the odd surprise of someone catching a toe on the carpet when I miss an easy "eddy out."

My kayak tips and a scream clogs my throat. I completely forget about the Eskimo roll I've been practicing. I rip off my spray skirt before plunging upside down into the frigid water. Can I shove myself out of my kayak in time? Climb to chest, my body commands, "out, now!" before I run out of air or smash my face on the river rocks below. In the roll of the current I can't tell which way is up. I feel the rush of cold water on my legs and hear someone yell, "Grab your kayak before it goes downstream!" As I haul myself and my kayak to shore to dump out the water and climb right back in, I tell myself, "Just survive today."

* * *

As Elizabeth and I leave the dock to follow our teammates, reflected city lights zigzag on the water, remnants of a morning yacht's wake. I feel a moment of weightlessness, of skates on ice. My gut impulse is to yelp and brace my oars flat on the water like outstretched feet. But I will myself to keep my arms moving and my mouth shut. Like bicycle riding, with momentum comes stability and with stability, balance.

A band of light crests the eastern horizon as Elizabeth seamlessly guides us through Montlake Cut, its concrete embankments emblazoned with purple-and-gold University of Washington bravado, all so familiar that it disappears like wallpaper. *Bust a nut in the Cut. This is Dang country.* Team rowing is a macho sport, so the finish line here in the Cut usually resounds with cox commands reaching a crescendo, oars smashing water with brute force. But we sweep through softly like leaves in a breeze.

* * *

My friends think I'm crazy, asking, "Are you *still* rowing? Isn't it cold out?" A jab to my physical toughness, but I know why they think I'm soft. Thirty years of downtown office work stitched with common dramas of American life—marriage, children, divorce, single parenting, death

of parents, remarriage, blended families—put exercise at the bottom of my priority list. But as I headed toward retirement, the steady climb of my cholesterol numbers echoed like a warning shot.

In the antiseptic fluorescence of my doctor's office, I sat on an examination table and tugged my gown closed. The white paper liner beneath me crinkled loudly, embarrassing. My doc looked up, tough-love sympathy in her pale-blue eyes.

"Sorry, hon," she said, "but with your family history of heart trouble, you need to do *something*. We already talked about your new diet: meat as a condiment." I pinched my lips together and nodded as the air between us tightened. "So, what's your exercise routine?" She knew the answer.

I noted her lean, toned arms. Even under baggy scrubs she appeared as fit as when she'd delivered my first baby twenty years earlier. Before kids, I never worried about exercise: I biked and liked on weekends and played volleyball three nights a week. But after kids, I barely had time for the occasional walk around Green Lake. Divorce cut that off too.

Suddenly her eyes lit up and she nodded vigorously, her frizzed blond hair bouncing. "I got it! You need something new." She leaned forward, almost confidentially. "What about . . . *lake swimming*?" The way the *l* curled around her tongue it was as if she were offering an illicit treat, luscious and undeniable as a juicy rib eye steak. But for me—haunted by the burn of chlorine in my throat, my brother's laugh as he flipped my air mattress, my father's dive to save me—swimming alone in fifty-degree water in a wetsuit was not simply uncomfortable, it was unthinkable. It took a full second to register that she wasn't kidding.

"That sounds like complete torture," I said flatly. "No, no, it's really fun!" She was still bobbing, way too enthusiastic. Turns out she's a triathlete. She swims in Lake Washington all the time.

"Not for me, I'll do *anything* short of that." So that's when I started rowing. Although not an intuitive choice for a fifty-something woman with a healthy aversion to spandex, rowing was, in my mind, slightly short of lake swimming. I still pull on a body-hugging outfit, go outside, and get cold and wet. But done correctly, I never go *into* the water.

* * *

"In two, up two." My brain snaps to attention as Elizabeth calmly asks for a faster stroke rate. We've cleared the Cut. Gone are the crisscrossing waves bouncing between the concrete embankments, so with smoother water ahead, she knows we can go faster. I close my eyes and press. It doesn't matter that I'm rowing blind. Our oars grab water with metronomic precision as the pulse of the boat feels stronger, louder. Harmony begets balance, and with a dancer's rhythm we fly. "In two, up two," she repeats, and we surge again. Oars clap in oarlocks. I visualize perfect pivots of oars over water, blades dropping in square, powerful leg drives, and arms arcing wide at the catch. My shoulders relax. Our glide feels like forever. I forget I'm fifty-nine.

"In two, twenty on, ten off!" Elizabeth jolts me out of my reverie. I open my eyes to ready myself for twenty strokes at full power, followed by ten easy strokes, to find that we're far past where I thought we'd be. The fresh glow of sunrise reflects off our wake, now on the fringe of Lake Washington! My knuckles whiten and my face goes cold. Rising fear clenches my throat. My body feels unsteady, starts to wobble. Shouldn't we turn around? Thirty strokes in and we'll be deep in the swirl of competing eddies within the 110-foot-deep body of Lake Washington without a lifeline. I'm acutely aware we have no life vests.

Over my left shoulder, Stacie and Heidi are curving toward the Evergreen Point Floating Bridge, an asymptotic approach that will lead them across Lake Washington. Suddenly I feel the current roll beneath me, our boat rolling side to side. My body lurches and overcorrects. "Are they going to Bellevue?" I ask Elizabeth, aware that my voice is edging higher. "Are we going to Bellevue?"

"We're in a double," she says, and immediately I know she's made up her mind. She laughs lightly. "Don't worry, we won't fall in."

She's broken a cardinal rule. Saying a catastrophic thing won't happen plants it firmly in my mind. My slide shortens, my body tenses, proof that I'm freaking out. My flowing dance rhythm turns to robotic goose step. Like a blind person's cane, my oars are tentatively tapping—searching for water, because one strong, misguided push—and an oar whiff—could flip us over. I'm straining to hear her yell "way enough!" the safe word, the command to stop. My eyes search for shoreline. Can I swim that far?

Of course she feels it. "Lengthen," she says calmly, and

MARSHALL CROSSMAN

Beach Series #150, 2015
Oil on canvas, 10 x 10 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

boat. I didn't. As I felt the soles of my feet release to thin air, my rear slipped off the sliding seat and I tumbled—back first, feet up, pure surprise on my face—into fifty-degree water. Sputtering to the surface, gasping at the sudden chill, I was initially relieved when the coach piloted his launch over to save me. Instead he anxiously yelled, “Can you get back in? I don't know what to do, I've never flipped!” My eyes flew wide as I saw, just beyond the launch, an oncoming barge. I surprised myself at how quickly I hauled my torso over the gunnel and snaked back onto my seat. Over coffee later that morning, Elizabeth agreed, “I've never seen anyone bounce out of the water that fast!” She laughed. Elizabeth's seen me at my worst; that's why she knows I'm better than I think. Her calm solidarity, a precious gift, sweetens far beyond the pure physical joy of rowing. She confirms that in this unlikely sport that I've chosen, I have nothing to fear.

Cateophony stilled, my mind slowly reengages. Off to starboard, Stacie and Heidi skim close to the bridge, oars bending through the water. Elizabeth aligns our boat and says nothing, but I know what she's thinking: *Fifty-power strokes and we'll catch them*. Suddenly my body just knows what to do. I lift my chest from my protective crouch, lower both hands, and press hard with my legs. The foot stretchers hug my feet. The boat steadies. As if by magic, my oars lift. A flowing rhythm embraces me as each stroke cuts cleaner and crisper.

Soon we're streaming side by side, matching stroke for stroke. “Mountain's out today,” calls Heidi, and in that moment even our heads swirl in unison. The rose-tinted snowcap of Mount Rainier rises in the distance. Lake Washington's a mirror. Sisters in oars, we fly.

Amber Wong is an environmental engineer in Seattle, Washington, who writes about culture, identity, and her firsthand knowledge about risks posed by hazardous waste sites. Recent work has been published in *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Entropy*, *Full Grown People*, *Lunch Ticket* (featured essayist), and *Slippery Elm*. Her essay “How I Learned to Write” won the Writers' Connection essay contest. Wong earned an MFA from Lesley University and a master's degree in civil engineering from Stanford University.

I try, but I can't. What felt comfortable just ten strokes ago now feels impossible. Moving up the slide makes the boat tippy, out of control, vulnerable. We're balancing on wave crests as the current pushes us sideways. On every stroke I'm mortified when I feel my oar blades chatter atop the washboard waves, mulish training wheels searching for balance. Dragging your oars for stability is such a novice move. I'm ruining our row. Rowing is such a mind game. Even if you know you can, once you think you can't, it's all over. Elizabeth tries reasoning with my inner child. “Look, I can see all the way to Bellevue. The water's calm just past this current.” I'm supposed to stare straight ahead and trust her, but I break that fundamental rule—as I slide forward I sneak a peek.

Of course she's telling the truth. Only one hundred meters away the water turns dark as satin, the morning wind fully stilled. Across the lake expanse, from the bridge to as far as I can see, the water's tame as Jell-O. Emboldened, my better self exhorts, “I've rowed to Bellevue before!” while my lesser self whimpers, “With a coach on a launch who could save me.” Slowly I unclench my fists, and despite my dubious history with water, I intone to myself, *I need to get with the program. If there is any day to row across the lake, this is it*. Then, with startling sincerity, I hear the words from Elizabeth that seal the deal.

“I won't let you fall in.”

It's not a throwaway line; there's a world of difference between saying “We won't fall in” and “I won't let you.” The first is conjecture, the second a promise. Could she possibly keep this promise? Her oarblades, her one square foot of real estate on the water—could they really prevent us from flipping if a motorboat, a gravel barge, or an errant current swamps us? If the wind kicks up whitecaps or the fog rolls in? Or if we make a mistake, catching a crab or hitting an unexpected buoy? No, the veracity of her promise is rooted in mutual trust and experience. She asks me to trust that she'll never lead us beyond our capability. She asks me to trust my own skill to row through today's conditions. She knows me. Empirical evidence bears it out: in our eight years of rowing together, we've never flipped a boat. “Never even came close,” I'm sure she'd say.

I've done it to myself exactly once. One April I was rowing a single when our coach called a “fret out” drill, a drill to remind you to keep your body weight in the center of the